

Performing Peace

Gandhi's assassination as a critical moment in the consolidation of
the Nehruvian state

Yasmin Khan

Abstract

The consolidation of the Nehruvian state's sovereignty after Independence is traced here as a contingent event which was tightly linked to the impact of Gandhi's assassination and the mourning rituals which followed his death in 1948. The Congress was able to use the funeral, mortuary rituals and distribution of Gandhi's ashes to assert the power of the state and to stake the Congress Party's right to sovereignty. This intersected with localized and religious expressions of grief. Gandhi's death therefore acted as a bridge, spatially and temporally linking the distant state with the Indian people and underscoring transitions to Independence during the process of postcolonial transition from 1947–1950.

Introduction

Despite ever-increasing attention to performance as a mode of politics and the way that performance has shaped political possibilities in the postcolonial era, Gandhi's death and assassination, and associated mourning rituals, have been curiously neglected as sites of historical research.¹ Gandhi was assassinated on 30 January, 1948 and his death was followed by epic public outpourings of grief. A public funeral in New Delhi was followed by a fortnight-long official mourning period and then

¹Versions of this paper have been presented at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of Edinburgh, University of Southampton and at the 'Everyday State in South Asia' workshop in Leeds in September 2008; I am grateful for many useful questions, comments and suggestions. On theatricality and ritual in the Indian political arena, see Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence. Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Jim Masselos, *The City in Action: Bombay Struggles for Power* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

the immersion of his ashes in Allahabad. By any standards, the public reaction was overwhelming and there was widespread participation in these rituals by immense numbers of people. The mourners on the river banks at Allahabad were estimated as ‘numbering more than a million’.² Indian nationalist historiography placed a considerable amount of emphasis on the date of Gandhi’s death as the turning point in ‘communal’ relations after Partition. This narrative conveys both the triumph of Congress over the adversities of Partition and the triumph of ‘secularism’ over ‘communalism’. It was also an important way to make sense of Gandhi’s assassination, as he was a martyr to the cause of ‘communal’ peace, and the public ‘returned to their senses’ only through his death. Yet the main bulk of posthumous scholarly attention to Gandhi’s assassination focuses on the legal case against Gandhi’s assassin, the prosecution of the accused and the Congress-directed suppression of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and other associated religious nationalist movements in the immediate aftermath of the killing.³

During the weeks following Gandhi’s death the prohibition on religious nationalist parties and the trial of his assassin, Nathuram Godse, were used by the Congress Party to secure political power and leverage for the Congress *vis à vis* rivals and challengers. Some social complicity in Gandhi’s assassination and the failure of those around him to protect him were clear. The Kapur Commission of Inquiry blamed a generalized apathy about protecting Gandhi. He was someone for whom the police, for decades, under the tutelage of the Raj, had become accustomed to perceiving as the enemy.⁴ In the first few hours, as the news of Gandhi’s death spread, mixed with grief, there was the fear that a Muslim may have been responsible, and the awareness that, if so, there could be many more attacks although the

² *The Times*, 13 February, 1948. This figure was also used by the British High Commissioner in Delhi.

³ Christophe Jaffrelot, ‘Opposing Gandhi: Hindu Nationalism and Political Violence’ in D. Vidal, G. Tarabout, and E. Meyer, (eds), *Violence/Non-Violence. Some Hindu Perspectives* (Delhi: Manohar-CSH, 2003), pp. 299–324; David Hardiman, *Gandhi in his Time and Ours* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), pp. 185–194; A. G. Noorani, *Savarkar and Gandhi: The Godse Connection* (Delhi: Leftword Books, 2002); Claude Markovits, *The UnGandhian Gandhi: The Life and Afterlife of the Mahatma* (London: Anthem Press, 2004); Ashis Nandy, ‘Final Encounter: the Politics of the Assassination of Gandhi’ in *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 70–99. Ashis Nandy’s article locates Gandhi’s assassination in its social and psychological context, unravelling the complex layers of interdependency between the assassin and the assassinated as mirror images of one another. Nandy stresses the fact that Gandhi’s thought threatened to subvert all the foundations of Godse’s own thinking, in his emphasis on de brahminsation, his understandings of Hinduism, and his re-evaluation of femininity and sexuality.

⁴ Nandy, ‘Final Encounter’, p. 89.

government went to great lengths to circulate information about Godse's culpability quickly. But before the news was disseminated that a Hindu extremist had been responsible, there were violent attacks against Muslims in Lucknow and in Bombay.⁵ One ICS⁶ officer remembered the terror that 'some lunatic Muslim' might have been responsible, and the law and order authorities were on a state of high alert.⁷ Once the details emerged, incidents of inter-religious violence subsided, becoming rare for several weeks and then reviving on a reduced scale. On 4 February the RSS, Muslim National Guards and the Khaksars were banned. Across India, perhaps 200,000 RSS *swayamsevaks* were detained,⁸ and the state moved decisively against the RSS. In Uttar Pradesh, for example, there were around 2,000 arrests.⁹ The Hindu Mahasabha was not banned and continued to operate in 'a shadowy area between what was acceptable in public life and what was not'.¹⁰ Both the RSS and Mahasabha had poor relationships with each other, and were wracked with internal dissent and organisational discord, as they attempted to reformulate their constitutions and establish new agendas.¹¹ The reputation of the Mahasabha was also damaged by the assassination. As the General Secretary admitted,

The diabolical murder of the Mahatma Gandhi has for the time being besmirched the fair name of the Hindu Mahasabha and I must confess with pain that there is consid-

⁵Opinion of domestic political situation, (IOR) L/PJ/8/794, First half February, 1948.

⁶Indian Civil Service, Civil service reporting to British colonial regime.

⁷M. A. Quraishi, *Indian Administration Pre and Post Independence: Memoirs of an ICS* (Delhi: BR Publishing, 1985), pp. 164–165. This moment of entangled anxiety and relief is also depicted in Salman Rushdies's *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage, 1981), p. 142, when a packed cinema hall hears the news of Gandhi's death: '... and finally the radio gave us the name. NathuRam Godse. "Thank God", Amina burst out, "it's not a Muslim name!" And Aadam, upon whom the news of Gandhi's death had placed a new burden of age: "This Godse is nothing to be grateful for!". Amina, however, was full of the light-headedness of relief, she was rushing dizzily up the long ladder of relief ... "why not, after all? By being Godse he has saved our lives!". Gandhi's death was also widely mourned in Pakistan. If Gandhi had been killed by a Muslim, the national and international outcomes could have been gravely different. On the impact of Gandhi's assassinations among Muslims see, Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 145.

⁸Walter Andersen and Shridhard Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: the RSS and the Hindu Revivalism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 51–52.

⁹B. R. Nanda (ed.), *Selected Works of Govind Ballabh Pant* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993) Vol. 12, p. 44. Pant at a press conference, 15 December, 1948.

¹⁰Bruce Graham, *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics: the origins and development of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 12.

¹¹On the inner struggles of these organisations, see Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*, Graham, *Hindu Nationalism*, Chapter 2, and Cristophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics*, Chapter 2.

erable panic and nervousness amongst the responsible members and workers of the Hindu Sabha in the United Provinces.¹²

The crackdown against the RSS could be used to exclude factional rivals within the Congress. There were many ways in which ideological binaries between secularism and communalism became blurred in local politics and remained far from clear-cut.¹³ However, for the purposes of this paper, it can be stressed that this was a major consolidation of power following Gandhi's death, both at a mundane and a symbolic level: through the selective use of the state apparatus, and the strengthening of Nehru's prime ministerial authority; the trial of Godse and his co-conspirators staged in the Red Fort; sanctions against the complicit rajas of Alwar and Bharatpur; the arrest and imprisonment of many Congress 'opponents'; and a prosecular propaganda and educational drive. This guaranteed the ascendancy of secularism and democracy as the legitimate ideological foundation of the Indian state and its constitutional and legal status, notwithstanding grave failures in implementation. As Gyanendra Pandey has suggestively noted,

it is an improbable story of how a certain kind of bodily sacrifice in the public sphere — and a refusal by one outstanding leader to give his consent to the particular conception of the political community that was emerging — changed the nature of sociality at the local level.¹⁴

The mundane consolidation of this power was made explicit in the aftermath of Gandhi's death, for example, the draft constitution of the Indian Union and the first annual budget of free India were both published in early March 1948, only six weeks after Gandhi's ashes had been scattered.

Yet, there has been little attention paid to the funeral and mourning *rituals* themselves as *political* events, widely shared and experienced by recently-emancipated postcolonial Indians, new citizens of the Indian nation state. The historical record has intuitively recorded Gandhi's death as 'a turning point' but has assumed this as *a priori* and due to the 'natural' shock of his death. This change in mood cannot be assumed as natural, though, given the severe and ongoing consequences of Partition and Gandhi's own unpopularity at the time. Assassinations are random and contingent events, but also unfold 'in the terms of a particular cultural field, from which the actors draw meaning'.¹⁵

¹²All India Hindu Mahasabha papers, M-19 (1948), Statement of Bishan Chandra Seth, 1948.

¹³William Gould, *Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics in Late Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1950* (London: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁴Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, p. 145.

¹⁵Marshall Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa* (Chicago:

Assassinations are not necessarily integrative, and death rituals do not necessarily bring people together in a Durkheimian sense.¹⁶ Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 was followed by grave violence against Sikhs and violence against Muslims and RSS members followed Gandhi's own death in the hours after his killing. State funerals of renowned individuals are, by their very nature rooted in the final rites of a person's life and their deep emotional resonance present opportunities that assist political actors to transcend social cleavages. Funerals may act to assimilate and to cohere disparate social groups. The respect due to the dead places a taboo on dissent and may lead, whether in Republican France or nineteenth-century America, to exceptional political solidarity and temporary exemption from the mundane, the partisan and the divisive.¹⁷ But this outcome cannot be taken for granted and politics may be shaped by the process of mourning itself.¹⁸ In the Indian sub-continent the political usage of tombs and death anniversaries has a particularly rich and complex pre-colonial history and in the twentieth century this has been well-utilized and adapted for political purposes by the Congress Party, whose own leading dynasty has been peculiarly afflicted by a series of unfortunate deaths and assassinations.¹⁹ Indeed, the centrality of death to Indian life and religious thought, the importance of violent deaths in particular and their appropriation by both Brahmanical Hinduism and folk cults, suggests that Gandhi's death was a political event with the capacity for deep social transformation.²⁰

University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 291.

¹⁶ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Originally published in 1912, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Avner Ben-Amos, *Funerals, Politics and Memory in Modern France, 1789–1996* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Barry Schwartz, 'Mourning and the Making of a Sacred Symbol: Durkheim and the Lincoln Assassination' *Social Forces*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (December 1991).

¹⁸ 'Mourning may be used', write Rebecca Saunders and Kamran Aghaie 'for hegemonic or counter hegemonic, oppressive or emancipatory, purposes; processes of mourning contain a formidable cache of loose power, ideologically useful affect, and empty signifiers that numerous entities — religious, political, social, economic — have not failed to put to use'. Rebecca Saunders and Kamran Aghaie, 'Introduction: Mourning and Memory' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 25 No. 1 (2005), p. 22. See also, Michael C. Kearl, *Endings: A Sociology of Death and Dying* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Liz Wilson (ed.), *The Living and the Dead: Social dimensions of death in South Asian religions* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003); and Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹⁹ The affliction of South Asian dynasties such as the Bhuttos and Nehru-Gandhis by assassination deserves further critical investigation and analysis.

²⁰ Claus Peter Zoller and Elisabeth Schombucher (eds), *Ways of Dying: Death and its Meanings in South Asia* (Manohar, 1999), Stuart H. Blackburn, 'Death and Deification: Folk Cults in Hinduism',

This paper does not seek to challenge the intuitive and empirical evidence which emphatically shows that 30 January, 1948 was a critical turning point. Rather than revise this historical orthodoxy, this paper will argue that it was not only the *fact* of Gandhi's death itself but through the *performance* of the attendant rituals, ceremonies and the public and private manifestations of grief that Indian state sovereignty was consolidated and extended.

Here, the term 'sovereignty' is used to signal a concern with how a postcolonial state, to some extent exogenously created by external intervention, expands and consolidates its imagined, figurative and metaphorical power in the political sphere after the moment of independence. The maintenance of sovereign power preoccupies all states but raises particular issues in the context of decolonization. In postcolonial states patrimonial, community and religious centres of power have vied for omnipotence with the sovereign power of the nation state in overlapping and intersecting ways.²¹ The postcolonial state expands and attempts the displacement of 'lower-order legitimacies' but is ever only partially able to do so.²² In India, where state sovereignty has exuded a powerful imaginary in many places, there has been a project of retrospectively naturalising the appearance of state-sovereignty fit. Naturalising sovereign power is always an ongoing enterprise. There is a particular irony here as Gandhi himself was an advocate of alternative forms of sovereignty and an important critic of the Westphalian nation state. Yet, Gandhi's death provides a moment during which the sovereign power of the nation-state, led by the Congress Party (which Gandhi was also deeply critical of by the time of his death), could be expanded and consolidated.

This is not to suggest either a simplistic reductionism in which the power of the secular state becomes fixed, sovereign and settled after Gandhi's death. Clearly this had to be constantly remade and reiterated. Riots continued alongside the economic and political marginalization of Muslims and myriad problems concerning the consolidation of the nation state. The public reactions to Gandhi's assassination made a decisive difference in the reception of state-centric articulations of secularism by inscribing power in a particular idiom at a time when alternative Hindu-nationalist

History of Religions, Vol. 24, No. 3 (February, 1985), pp. 255–274.

²¹For valuable discussions of contested sovereignty in the postcolonial context see Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Steputtat (eds), *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants and States in the Postcolonial World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Thomas J. Biersteker and Cynthia Weber (eds), *State Sovereignty as Social Construct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²²The phrase is from Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 31.

formations had been far from discredited. Grassroots interpretations of Gandhi's assassination intersected with the modernizing and memorializing political discourse of the Congress. The ways in which the Congress acted as 'the state' during the funeral was vital. The bestowing of the ashes, organization of the rituals without colonial constraints, and use of the full force of the media and governmental resources, interlinked provinces and districts through a chain of instructions and commands.

Debates about the nature of the state in postcolonial South Asia have pointed to the Nehruvian state's distance and detachment from everyday, commonsense and quotidian life in the 1950s. The state led a project of transformation, regulating citizens' bodies and naturalizing sovereign power while unexpectedly colliding with the upward pressures of alternative centres of sovereignty. There has also been increasing 'entanglement', in the words of Partha Chatterjee, of elite and subaltern politics since independence.²³ In this light, Gandhi's death and attendant rituals sit within a specific matrix of circumstances at a critical juncture, where both temporally and spatially the sovereignty of the postcolonial state was still uncertain. The contested nature of state sovereignty and the human and ideological insecurity was part of an extended process in the months following Partition. The vast humanitarian challenges of refugee resettlement collided with the problems of contested borders, the incorporation of the princely states, tense relations with Pakistan, particularly but not solely about Kashmir, and a dark shadow over the authority of Nehru who was engaged in private ideological tussles with the Home Minister.²⁴ Private armies substituted for police authority and political activists were able to heavily influence policy and circumvent or challenge state authority or replace it altogether at many levels of government, and in many provinces.

²³See discussions in this Special Issue. Also, Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Steputtat (eds), *States of Imagination: Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Steputtat (eds), *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants and States in the Postcolonial World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Partha Chatterjee 'Sovereign Violence and the Domain of the Political' in Hansen and Steputtat (eds), *Sovereign Bodies*, p. 85.

²⁴Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (London: Yale University Press, 2007). Srirupa Roy identifies the same dates, describing this as the 'long transition' from colonial rule, *Beyond Belief*, pp. 25–26, 70. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rochona Majumdar and Andrew Sartori (eds), *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007). Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar emphasizes the protracted and constructed nature of the Pakistani and Indian states during the processes accompanying Partition, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

The Mahatma's funeral in New Delhi, 30 January–1 February 1948

Gandhi's funeral, carried out in New Delhi within 24-hours of his death, was a curious hybrid of colonial ritual, Hindu tradition, and spontaneous outpourings of public grief. It was the first state spectacle organized in independent India after Independence Day in 1947. The funeral was an invented ritual which deviated from 'traditional' Hindu funerary rites, for instance, the bier was not carried by kinsmen but placed on a carriage. It was also infused with imperial echoes of the Delhi durbars while displaying many of the tropes of the annual Republic Day ceremony. It may have been familiar, then, in some ways to the crowd but was also unique and unrepeatable.

The militarism of Gandhi's funeral (and the sheer irony of it) has been observed by contemporary commentators and later writers. Four-thousand troops, 1,000 armed men, 100 police and 100 navy men marched in the funeral procession itself, including the Rajputana Rifles, Madras Regiment, Bengal Sappers and Miners, Indian Signal Corps, armoured vehicles and the mounted cavalry of the General Governor's bodyguard. Gandhi's body was carried from Birla House²⁵ on the morning of the funeral and placed on a converted gun carriage which was very heavily covered in flowers and sandalwood, with only the face of the Mahatma visible. This was pulled by troops, with relatives and other disciples on foot in front of it.

At a quarter to mid-day the cortege pulled out of the driveway to the sound of blown conch-shells. The procession moved from Albuquerque road onto Queensway then onto Kingsway and to the India Gate, which it reached less than an hour later, with Gurkhas and paratroopers proceeding in front in order to clear the way. Baldev Singh, Nehru and Patel were seated alongside the body by this time on the main vehicle itself, with Gandhi's son, Devdas Gandhi, as the chief mourner, seated at the head of the vehicle. The kinship of the leading Congressmen with Gandhi was therefore visibly emphasized with Nehru naturally assuming the role of 'son and heir'. The cortege then moved through the Memorial Gate and then to Hardinge Avenue, Mathura Road and Powerhouse Road (one reminder of the ongoing process of transition to independence was that these roads were still bearing their old names) ending at the bank on the edge of the river Yamuna.

State funerals had been used consciously as a political tool within and between

²⁵Birla house was at 5 Albuquerque Road, renamed after the date of Gandhi's death as Tees January Marg.

imperial states prior to independence.²⁶ The elaborate design, planning and execution of Gandhi's last rites was a self-conscious manifestation of state (and the Congress Party) sovereignty intended to inscribe state power (and the power, as Thomas Blom Hansen has put it of the 'sublime state')²⁷ at a time of acute crisis in the legal, policing and governmental strategies of the state. In the processional part of the funeral the 'Hindu-ness' of Gandhi was thoroughly marginalized. Infused with colonial symbolism, certain aspects of the ceremony could have been replicated along Whitehall or the Mall in London. Indeed it echoed explicitly the state funerals of British monarchs in the use of flags at half-mast, the gun carriage, military pageantry and use of a crowd-lined mall. The funeral was extensively photographed by Henri Cartier-Bresson and other international photographers and also aerially photographed. It was projected into the homes and marketplaces of Indians who could not attend through a specially relayed live All India Radio broadcast. This lengthy outdoor broadcast in itself was a technological feat which utilized the latest technology such as a mobile transmitter van.²⁸

The appropriation of, and expansion into, the grand colonial architectural spaces

²⁶ Modern state funerals in Britain were a Victorian innovation. When the Nawab of Oudh was deposed in 1856, the exiled Queen Mother travelled to Europe. She died in Paris and was given a French state funeral as a diplomatic snub to Britain. Controversies continue about the political implications of state funerals in South Asia; consider the debates about Mother Theresa's televised state funeral in 1998.

²⁷ In understanding this, Thomas Blom Hansen offers a useful analytical framework. He examines the 'myth of the state' in India, in other words, the multiple ways in which the state is understood and perceived. He argues that the Indian state is typically imagined in a dual way; on one side there is the 'profane' aspect of the state, which encompasses the self-interest, brutality and banality in the humdrum of everyday administration. Corruption, violence and inefficiency would all be included in this category. On the other side stands the 'sublime' aspects of the mysterious and powerful state, which is known through 'its hidden resources, designs and immense power, and the higher forms of rationality or even justice believed to prevail there'. Ordinary Indians look to the state as the arbiter of legitimate claims and the provider of law and order, even if on many occasions it fails in this role. It is therefore essential that this myth of the state is upheld. T. Blom Hansen, 'Governance and Myths of State in Mumbai' in, Chris J. Fuller and Veronique Beneii (eds), *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India* (London: Hurst, 2001), pp. 34–38.

²⁸ Sabeena Gadihoke, 'Uncovering Histories: Homai Vyarawalla and chronicling the nation' in *Homenage to Mahatma Gandhi* (Unpublished paper, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi). The appropriation and use of All India Radio by the Congress was another important way to extend imagined sovereignty in 1947–1948 — a medium with national reach but tightly controlled and closed to political leaders until independence. After independence Congress made regular use of the medium to convey national messages. See Alasdair Pinkerton, 'Radio and the Raj: broadcasting in British India (1920–1940)', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* ISSN 1356–1863, Volume 18.2, 2008, pp. 167–191.

of Lutyen's and Herbert Baker's Delhi, in parallel with ceremonies and rituals on Independence Day and Republic Days, was deliberate. It speaks clearly of the explicit aim of linking Gandhi (who after all had no formal political position within the state at the time and had of course worked in opposition to many of the power monopolies and militarism of the Westphalian nation-state) to the visible architecture of Delhi's state power. This did not pass unremarked upon by eye-witnesses, particularly the design of the route which entailed the body passing under the India Arch, now called 'India Gate'. He was the first Indian to be 'honoured' in such a way. 'His going under the India Gate was perhaps symbolic. Alive he would have scoffed at the idea', noted one observer.²⁹ Naturally the personal role of Mountbatten who had remained in India as Governor-General and was a very astute believer in, and manipulator of, theatrical and public pageantry was also a hidden hand behind the planning of these aspects of the funeral procession. The crowds, as seen in news reels and photographs, were spectacularly large and densely packed and stood mostly in a 'passive' role as stunned and silent onlookers. Nehru had paternalistically reminded people of the need for silence and had, interestingly, requested no 'demonstrations' on the radio the evening before. Some had scrambled up trees and lamp posts in order to try and take *darshan* (sight) of the Mahatma and the silence was punctuated with loud cries of '*Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai*' and '*Mahatma Gandhi Zindabad*' (Long live Gandhi).

At the site of the pyre at Rajghat, shrubs and nettles had been cleared to create a space for the cremation and a brick and mud platform was raised on which the pyre was built. The intended plan was that the dignitaries and relatives would assemble close to the pyre. The crowds were to be held back from the main site by a cordon of barbed wire which was at least one hundred yards away from the platform where the body lay. The barrier was manned by mounted troops who were charged with holding back the pressing crowds. The ceremony was to be public, but not so public that all Indians could participate in it, and ambassadors and other foreign dignitaries were privileged in their nearness to the body. The Chinese ambassador, for instance, was the first to lay a wreath at the foot of the pyre. Lord and Lady Mountbatten, who had absented themselves consciously from the procession, now also joined the inner circle and were seated around the cremation site. The national flag was

²⁹K. L. Gauba, *The Assassination of Mahatma Gandhi* (Bombay: Jaico, 1969), p. 160. These colonial continuities in ritual planning have been remarked upon in other contexts; the assumption of pre-colonial motifs and rituals by the British in colonial *darbars* and, in the post-1947 years, the postcolonial state's appropriation of restyled imperial ritual for events like Republic Day. Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); Jim Masselos, 'India's Republic Day: The Other 26 January', *South Asia* Vol. 19 (special issue) (1996), pp. 183–203; Roy, *Beyond Belief*, pp. 66–105.

removed from the body and sandalwood logs were piled up on top of it. Ramdas Gandhi performed the lighting of the pyre and the attending priest, Pandit Ram Dhan Sharma, recited Vedic texts.

As the flames climbed upwards crowds surged forward against the cordon, broke it and rushed forward ‘dangerously close to the pyre’. Troops were directed to intervene and Nehru was personally seen urging people to go back while leading members of the cabinet picked up small children. Eventually, mounted lancers were used to physically press back the people who had come to see Gandhi’s last rites. The spatial and hierarchical distance of the VIPs was therefore vigorously and repeatedly reinforced through the cordoning off of separate areas, the use of barbed wire and the *lathi* charges and use of mounted troops. Leading politicians stressed the need for orderly discipline throughout the crowds.³⁰

The funeral itself was undoubtedly a spectacular sight but appears to have been oddly disconnected from the mass of Indian people in the crowd who, for the most part, were consigned to playing the roles allotted by Nehru as onlookers, passive crowds, respectfully distanced from the Mahatma’s body. This spectacle was orientated in many ways to the international gaze. The importance of Gandhi as a Great Man in the eyes of the world’s leading politicians was paramount. Gandhi’s greatness and by extension, Indian-ness itself, were being honoured and making headline news from Washington DC to Beijing. This global recognition was another important ingredient of Gandhi’s death. This was particularly pronounced on the political right-wing. The Uttar Pradesh Congressman Purushottam Das Tandon emphasized how, ‘World history will still remember him when many other figures strutting the world stage today are forgotten’.³¹ It was only the beginning of a wide series of official and semi-official mourning rituals and contrasts with the wide array of mourning practices all over India.

³⁰The disciplining of crowds took on new dimensions now that the Congress was the party of sovereign power, raising critical questions about the legitimacy of crowd action. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘In the name of politics: Sovereignty, Democracy and the Multitude in India’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 July, 2005.

³¹*The Pioneer*, 2 February, 1948. *The Pioneer*, a Lucknow-based English language paper, contained particularly detailed reports on the funeral and its aftermath in 1948.

A fortnight of mourning and the immersion of Gandhi's ashes

In contrast to the official state funeral, which had been organized by the Commander-in-Chief and centred upon Delhi and orientated towards the international gaze, local and state level mourning took on vernacular forms which far transcended official instructions and orders from the Congress Party. Gandhi emerged now as a saintly personage and even miracle-worker and his corporeal relics took on a special importance. It was this mediation of the funereal rites by the public which transformed the rituals from empty or 'banal' state-centred gestures and infused them with political meaning and transformative possibilities. It may have instigated the groundswell of feeling in favour of 'secularism/toleration' towards non-Muslims. This gave much-needed credibility to Nehruvian secularism with which this historical moment is now so well (and rightly) associated.

Almost immediately after Gandhi's death a struggle over how to honour his memory and how to dispose of his physical body began. A strong lobby for embalming Gandhi's body in the manner of Lenin was fought off with Nehru's personal intervention. He even mentioned it in his address to the nation the night preceding the funeral. 'It was his wish repeatedly expressed that this should not be done ... we decided we must follow his wishes in this matter no matter how much others might have wished otherwise'.³²

However, although traditional cremation was decided upon, the veneration of Gandhi's body and, after his cremation, of his relics, went far beyond state-sanctioned or officially orchestrated proceedings. After the actual *darshan* of the body itself was no longer possible, following the cremation ceremony, the crowds continued to pursue a physical connection with Gandhi, preferably by looking at or touching his bodily remains, or if that was not possible, by *puja* (reverent worship) and prayers in front of his image. There was a clamour for Gandhi's bodily remains, both physically at the site of Raj Ghat and then in many ensuing debates surrounding the distribution of his ashes. After the pyre had burned out at Raj Ghat on the evening of the funeral, even late at night large crowds still remained. 'There was a great scramble and a diligent search for small twigs of the sandal chips near the pyre and many were seen with the greatest reverence picking up withered and trodden rose petals, picking up twigs from the mound of wreaths or bits of ash blown by the breeze'.³³ At the site of the place where the Mahatma had fallen as a result of the

³²*Ibid.*, 31 January, 1948.

³³*Ibid.*, 2 February, 1948.

gunshots at Birla house, the spot where his blood had fallen also became a sacred site and a deep pit emerged as people gathered up handfuls of the earth,

at the back of Birla House bamboo poles have been erected round the spot where Mahatma Gandhi fell in order to discourage the public from scooping handfuls of earth to preserve as sacred souvenirs. There was already a pit over a foot deep. A large number of people visited the spot today and offered prayers.³⁴

Indeed, access to this site itself became controversial and highly contested. Birla House introduced visiting hours as a way of managing the crowds and the Congress High Command received bitter complaints about denial of access to the site. As Bhagwan Das Halna wrote to Nehru,

I beg to apologise to write this letter to you. Had it not been a matter of utmost national importance, I would certainly not have troubled you with it.

The thing is that not only I but millions of Indians think that the place where the Mahatma was shot dead has become sacred and is like a pilgrimage to us. On the evening of 13th March 48 I went to Birla House to pay my respectful homage to this sacred place but was told that people were not allowed to enter in Birla House for this purpose since 11th February. I was simply dumbfounded and had to return very sadly and with tears in my eyes.

When *pacci vedi* [an altar] has been constructed there and when the same is worshipped daily with flowers according to press reports, we also should not be deprived of that *puja*.³⁵

Some demanded that the bones should be preserved rather than scattered and telegrammed in protest. ‘Gandhiji’s ashes alone may be dissolved. Request preservation of bones as sacred relics. Recalling preservation of Buddha’s relics. Pray issue instructions’.³⁶ Indeed, this explicit parallel drawn with Buddha was not far-fetched. During the two-week mourning period, Gandhi’s former role as a political leader, associated with politicized decisions such as the balance of payments settlement with Pakistan, seems to have been transcended. As the day of the immersion ceremony at the *sangam* at Allahabad approached, one English language newspaper headline even suggested, ambivalently, ‘Mahatma Gandhi being worshipped’.³⁷

³⁴*Ibid.*, 2 February, 1948.

³⁵Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, All India Congress Committee papers G-8 Part 2 (1947) [Hereafter AICC], Bhagwan Das Halna to Nehru 19 March, 1948. In his reply on 9 April, the Congress secretary, Sadiq Ali, acknowledged, ‘We are aware of the widespread feeling in the matter you have raised in your letter. The matter is receiving our serious consideration.’

³⁶*The Pioneer*, 9 February, 1948, Telegram to Nehru.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 11 February, 1948.

Most significantly of all, the national fortnight of mourning declared by the Congress leadership coincidentally coincided with the holding of the Ardh Kumbh Mela at Allahabad, or Prayag, at the confluence of three rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati, which was held every six years and at which thousands of sadhus, gurus and pilgrims had gathered for a mass ritual bathing, for the cleansing of past sins. At the camp at the Ardh Kumbh Mela, thousands of pilgrims daily were praying in front of a large portrait of the Mahatma which had been placed on a dais with a *charkha* (spinning wheel) in front of it, and the Quran and the Gita on either side of it. They were reported to be ‘worshipping the dais as a temple of God and many of them have even offered coins as is customary in temples of other deities’.³⁸

Over the following fortnight the kinship of the deceased and his relationship to the broader community were constantly articulated and made explicit in the rituals themselves and in the wider media commentary. The paternalistic role of ‘*Bapu*’ (Father) had a long lineage in the anti-colonial movement. After death this status was reinforced by a gendered vocabulary which stressed the orphaning and child-likeness of the people left without their leader. Devdas Gandhi spoke of his countrymen as ‘fellow orphans’ and the headline of *The Pioneer*, marked with a black border on 31 January, proclaimed ‘The nation is fatherless’. Devdas’ broadcast on All India Radio was an intimate and personal account of Gandhi’s last days and minutes, and the procedures for dealing with the body after his passing. This included details of his final breaths, how the body was undressed and the location of clots of blood. This metaphor of Gandhi as the father and co-parent to Mother India was prevalent in the following two weeks. Intimate rituals, usually closed to all but the closest kin, were shared by all. Although the family were closely involved, the Congress was also projected as an extended ‘family’ and Nehru was very much the ‘son’ and heir with his own political status and authority clearly reinforced in the aftermath of the death.

The collective responsibility for Gandhi’s death, as stressed by Nehru and Congress leaders, was reiterated in public discourse.³⁹ This also had resonance with Indian understandings of death. An innocent victim, subject to a sudden and violent death, universally carries a special status across varieties of Hindu belief. A ‘bad or untimely death’, which has come suddenly and at the hands of a murderer, can only be redeemed or transmuted into a ‘good death’ (*akal mrityu*) through the actions and good intentions of those who serve the deceased. In this context, the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 11 February, 1948.

³⁹ See for example, N. N. Agarwala, *India’s Saviour Crucified: A challenge for us to think and act* (Agra: Shiva Publication, 1948).

extraordinary outpouring of grief and ritual honouring of Gandhi's memory and image, and the substantive political changes which occurred almost immediately in the aftermath of Gandhi's death, can be properly understood. There was almost obsessive concern about the manner and timing of Gandhi's death and an intimate association between the people and the deceased as a paternalistic presence.

As Jonathan Parry writes, ghosts are likely to recur unless 'appropriate propitiatory rituals are perfectly performed'.⁴⁰ In the classical reading, Gandhi's own death would have been a product of his own bad karma. This almost unthinkable proposition posed a challenge for the society in which it had taken place. A bad death could at least be transmuted into a better one by propitiatory rituals and by a time of tranquillity and good fortune. This had a direct political implication and there was a repeated emphasis in the political rhetoric on the notion of shame. Gandhi's death was a *product* of the Indian people's own wrongdoing and had to be borne and atoned for by society as a collective 'family'. As Nehru said, 'We are all responsible for this unprecedented tragedy. ... It is a disgrace that [the] people of India could not save Mahatma Gandhi'.⁴¹ In the crowds of mourners for Gandhi, symbolic acts such as head shaving, the removal of shoes and the donning of white *khadi* became widespread.⁴²

The distribution of Gandhi's ashes

The fortnight of official mourning and the immersion ceremony in Allahabad, during which Gandhi's ashes were immersed in the confluence of the rivers welded together a collective sense of responsibility for Gandhi's death. This was twinned with renewed respect for the Congress Party and an enhanced sense of state power. The rituals involved a long circuitous special train journey that carried Gandhi's ashes through the Uttar Pradesh political heartland of both Congress and Hindu nationalism. Then the Congress parcelled out ashes to all states of India. This played a decisive role in linking together reverence for Gandhi with the authority of the

⁴⁰Jonathan Parry, *Death in Banaras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 161–162.

⁴¹Sarvepalli Gopal, (ed.), *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru* [hereafter SWJN] (New Delhi, Oxford University Press) 2nd series, 5, pp. 63, 65. Speech at Jullundur, 24 February, 1948.

⁴²There were also parallels here with the death of princely rulers, such as the death of *Maharaja* Umaid Singh in 1947 and *Maharaja* Hanwant Singh of Jodhpur in 1952. These deaths were similarly not simply family matters but demanded widespread and overt public mourning over two weeks in which members of all communities participated by paying their respects, often by visiting the royal palace, many also shaving their heads. See Marzia Balzani, *Modern Indian Kingship: Tradition, Legitimacy and Power in Jodhpur* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003), p. 45.

Congress and the state.

The train, the Asthi Special, which carried Gandhi's ashes to the *prayag* (confluence) at Allahabad was made up of five third-class carriages. The urn was placed in the middle carriage, heavily covered in flowers and *khadi* flags and illuminated by six electric lights, and so clearly visible to spectators from the platform. Large images of the *charkha* and Ashoka's national lion seal were painted on the carriage. The deliberately engendered closeness between the national flag and the Congress flag, which were easily confused, was also reinforced by the presence of both national and Congress flags on the train. The train halted at ten stops in western Uttar Pradesh during its journey to Allahabad where vast crowds had assembled to take *darshan*.⁴³

These rituals clearly drew upon earlier forms of Congress organization and resembled in many ways the Gandhian *satyagrahas* and Congress activities of a nostalgically-remembered Gandhian heyday.⁴⁴ The funeral train, weaving its way from city to city in North India in 1948, presented a very familiar echo of earlier trains from which the fortunate could catch a *darshan* of the Mahatma. Many of the same people may have stood in the crowds. Black flags, used in the *hartals* (strikes) and processions of the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements, were a symbol of mourning but also resonant of these former days of public protest. Another familiar aspect was the role of the pledge, a regular Congress staple employed on Independence days and Republic days. Numerous speeches of Congress leaders in the aftermath of Gandhi's death mentioned the need to pledge to communal peace, to honour Gandhi's principles and stressed the moment as a redemptive one. Pledges were solemnly sworn on the day of the funeral in collective meetings.⁴⁵

⁴³There are echoes of President Lincoln's funeral in 1865 which utilized a very long and public train journey through America and acted to cohere a divided public at a critical moment. See Barry Schwartz, 'Mourning and the Making of a Sacred Symbol'.

⁴⁴Shahid Amin, for instance, has stressed the importance of train carriages and train stoppages during Gandhian campaigns of the early 1920s. Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922–1992* (Delhi: Penguin edition, 2006), p. 189.

⁴⁵One, printed in a pamphlet, to be completed by the reader, read as follows: 'I, rudely shaken to my very foundations by the sudden and unexpected demise of *Bapuji*, the Father of Our Nation, hereby pledge that I shall do everything possible, by action and thought, to see his cause succeed. I will see —

- a) That communalism is eradicated from every walk of our life
- b) That untouchability is liquidated once and for all, and
- c) That Social and Economic Democracy is brought into reality, that being the latest mission which Gandhiji laid down in the Harijan.

I am affixing my signature to this pledge, after full realisation of the difficulties involved as also the significance of this mission. Babuji Zindabad, Jai Hind.' (Agarwala, *India's Saviour Crucified*,

The ceremonies also acted as physical places for old Congress comrades to meet with one another. Congressmen from all the UP provinces and adjoining provinces assembled at Allahabad for the immersion of the ashes. Nostalgic and sorrowful meetings acted as a way of reconsolidating Congress and as part of the party's purification process. Centrally-directed commemorations were not a new innovation for the Congress and Lisa Trivedi has emphasized the importance of the 'visual consistency' of ritual holidays and the 'reconfiguration of time' by *swadeshi* proponents from the 1920s onwards, underpinned by specific calendars and well ordered agendas.⁴⁶ Gandhi's *jayanti* had long been celebrated annually in October and dates such as his incarcerations and fasts had been marked in the past. The death anniversaries of leaders such as Lala Lajpat Rai, G. B. Tilak and Bhagat Singh had long been signalled by processions, hagiographical press articles and emphasis on their sacrifices. In short, very familiar political tropes from the campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s (but which had become associated with an outdated mode of politics in many ways by the late 1940s) were revived by the funeral spectacle. The striking difference of course, now, was that the Congress had displaced British power and these Congress idioms could be presented as officially sanctioned government symbols. The funeral may have superficially, and initially, born all the hallmarks of imperial British ritual imposed from on high but this was rapidly subverted and transformed into a more complex interaction between Indian people and nationalist memory.

In this light, the decision to distribute some of Gandhi's ashes from Delhi to all the states of India was a political masterstroke on the part of the Congress. The instruction that ashes should be scattered in local rivers, spatially linked together India in a modern 'cartographic imaginary'. This linked together the provinces of India with India's physical geography and Gandhi's actual bodily remains. This network radiated out from Delhi and was under direct Congress control and supervision.⁴⁷ The ashes would be divided and portions would be sent to every provincial government, under the guidance of the state governors, who arrived in Delhi to collect the urns. The provincial governments were then directed to divide the ashes into three parts and to allocate them within their province. In reality this rule was flouted. In Bombay all ministers received a portion. The distribution of the ashes became a deeply political act, as provinces, leaders and districts struggled to assert their right to receive a portion of the sacred ashes. 'There has been keen competition

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⁴⁶Lisa Trivedi, *Clothing Gandhi's Nation: Homespun and Modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 102–108.

⁴⁷On cartography and the visualization of space in modern India see Sumathi Ramaswamy (ed.) *Beyond Appearances: Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India* (Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003).

and pressing requests have been received both by the provincial governments and in Delhi for portions of the ashes from places not in the programme'.⁴⁸ Quite plainly, there were not enough to go round. These can not simply be seen as acts of commemoration but became closely intertwined both with the extension and consolidation of political power by Congress provincial cadres and the marginalisation of opponents and factional rivals. The immersion ceremonies also provided an opportunity for the regrouping of Congressmen who came from long distances to participate.

The final part of the programme included the following rivers: Godvari at Nasik, Krishna at Bezwada, Cauvery at Srirangam, Sabarmati at Ahmedabad, Hooghly at Calcutta, Sutlej in East Punjab, Mahanadi in Orissa, Rivers Gomti and Gaya, the Brahmaputra in Assam, the Pavnar at Wardha and the seashores at Puri, Rameshwaram, Cape Cormorin and Porbunder. In reality, an underground trade in these ashes quickly developed and there are still at least two (unauthorized) places (one in the USA and one in India) where people claim to have possession of Gandhi's ashes. In 1997, ashes were uncovered in an urn in a bank vault in northern India, and were later scattered at the confluence of the Yamuna and Ganges rivers. Some ashes scattered in 2008 had been kept by Sriman Narayan, a businessman and associate of Gandhi and passed into the hands of his son, a businessman based in Dubai, upon Narayan's death.⁴⁹

It seems far from coincidental that several of the locations selected for the receipt of ashes were afflicted by inter-religious conflict. Decisions were motivated by the idea that social tensions could be alleviated by Gandhi's 'presence' in the form of ashes, just as in life his presence had been a calming presence in riot-torn areas. In Punjab, where the severe refugee crisis continued on a daily basis, military and police led the procession for the consignment to the River Sutlej. The contested state of Hyderabad was not initially in the list of destinations scheduled to receive a portion of the remains, but was added as a last-minute inclusion to the list. The prominent participation of princely rulers also emphasized the inclusiveness of the event. The distribution of the ashes of Gandhi, in particular, was a way for the Congress Party to extend its patronage to rulers who were weakened by the Partition crisis and wanted to cement their affiliation with the Congress settlement or, conversely, to marginalize and undermine the legitimacy of others. A special train was laid on from Rampur, the small Muslim majority princely state in western Uttar Pradesh, which had been affected by violent protests due to the state's accession to India.

⁴⁸ *The Pioneer*, 9 February, 1948.

⁴⁹ Father of the nation laid to rest: the afterlife of Mahatma Gandhi'. *The Independent*, Thursday, 31 January, 2008.

The Nawab of Rampur and ‘leading Hindu and Muslim citizens of the state’ came to Delhi to collect an urn of ashes, which was then carried back to the city, where the ashes were placed in a local river.⁵⁰

In a country where large crowds frequently constitute and shape the performance of politics, the scale of public involvement in Gandhi’s death rituals deserves to be restated. The division of the ashes into parts, and the spiritual force with which they were vested meant that Gandhi could literally *be in hundreds of places at once* in February 1948. Special trains carried people from the districts to attend the immersion ceremonies. Meetings were held in mosques, churches, temples, educational institutions, trade unions, clubs, Congress committees and bar associations. The moment could also be utilized as a way of squaring conflict and providing an extraordinary outlet for reconciliation which would otherwise have been unavailable. A disputed plot of land contested by Hindus and Muslims in Bangla Bazaar, a suburb of Lucknow, was dedicated as a space to raise a memorial to Gandhi instead.

The manner in which Gandhi’s remains were linked to the architectural spaces of the state, particularly provincial assembly buildings, is also worth noting. In many other states, the prime minister, governor, ministers and members of the public filed past the ashes which had been placed in a glass case in a porch-way of the provincial assembly building alongside a vast portrait of the Mahatma. Gandhi’s image and memory were linked to the state’s physical machinery and to its municipal buildings, provincial assembly buildings, bureaucrats and symbols.⁵¹

Memorialization

Nehru was strikingly self-conscious about Gandhi’s memorialization, and reflexive about the ways in which Gandhi’s memory could be appropriated for national causes after his death. While wishing to honour him and to avoid opportunistic commemoration he was also astute about the utility of Gandhi’s death-memorials to the national cause. The importance of theatricality, performance, ritual and commemoration was as well understood by Nehru as by his viceregal predecessor — ‘... brick and mortar has its uses’ he wrote on a proposed national memorial for Gandhi,

⁵⁰ *The Pioneer*, 9 February, 1948.

⁵¹ Film footage of the regional ceremonies reinforces this point and suggests the ways in which state officials were involved, the scale of crowd participation and the different ceremonial procedures accompanying the immersion of the ashes into the waters. See *Babuji’s Demise* available at [<http://www.gandhiserve.org>] [accessed 27 September 2010]. This film shows the immersion of Gandhi’s ashes, processions, crowds and ceremonies at Allahabad, Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Kanya Kumari, Travancore, Cochin, Ahmedabad, Kandla and Nasik.

'and is desirable to give some solid and substantial shape to our work. This has a psychological importance and a permanence'.⁵²

The ownership of Gandhi's memory and its connection to state power, however, rapidly became a challenge to centralized authority. Nehru in particular consistently attempted to define the limits of commemoration and to create a centralized monopoly on the project of Gandhi's memorialization. Provincial Congress cadres and local groups went too far and Nehru complained that too many streets and places were being named after Gandhi which would result in confusion. He was concerned at signs of coercive actions to extract donations to Gandhi memorial funds. He intervened to reverse an order making compulsory deductions from the salaries of civil service officers in Uttar Pradesh.⁵³ He also personally oversaw the sites associated with the cremation and funeral. 'The surface of the platform on which Mahatma Gandhi's body was cremated may be cemented in order that people in search of sacred earth from the spot will not be able to tamper with it' he instructed within days of the cremation.⁵⁴ Concrete, then, the ultimate symbol of the modernizing and developmental aspirations of the postcolonial state, could, quite literally, be used to seal Gandhi's memory and to limit people's interaction with his corporeal remains. Nehru also made protestations about 'unauthorized' or public expressions of grief in the form of statues, basing his arguments on an aesthetic sensibility underpinned by a hierarchy of artistic expression which is worth quoting at length:

Nevertheless, it is perhaps inevitable that some statues might be put up. If so, the greatest care should be taken that only real works of art are permitted. Unfortunately the standard in India of such statuary has been low and most people are satisfied with anything that bears a remote resemblance to the person concerned. Our cities and public places are full of structures which cannot by any stretch of the imagination be called artistic or pleasing to the sight. I have been shocked on many occasions at seeing these totally inadequate efforts. I should like to warn most earnestly those who are thinking in terms of having statues not to take any hasty decisions and to await a full consideration of this question by the National Memorial Committee under the chairmanship of the Congress President.⁵⁵

This intervention was a pronounced attempt again by the new prime minister to reassert the authority and sovereignty of the state in public spaces. This speaks

⁵²Valmiki Choudhary (ed.), *Dr. Rajendra Prasad: Correspondence and Select Documents* (Allied Publishers, 1984–1995), vol. 8, p. 58. Note from Nehru on proposed national memorial for Gandhi.

⁵³SWJN, 2nd series, Vol. 6, pp. x. Letter to Pant, 18 June, 1948.

⁵⁴SWJN, 2nd series, Vol. 5, pp. 45–46. Undated note accepted by the cabinet on 3 February, 1948.

⁵⁵SWJN, 2nd series, Vol. 5, p. 66. Statement to the press, 25 February, 1948.

of the distance between the Nehruvian executive and its secular logic and the vernacularization of commemoration, grief and memorialization in a different cultural register. The Congress High Command tried to discipline the ways in which Gandhi was remembered, Nehru deplored temples, statues and other memorial shrines which would ‘savour of idolatry’ being erected all over the country. Nevertheless, public expressions of grief were outrunning the ‘authoritative’ versions of public commemoration.⁵⁶

These events also worked as the end of an era. There was closure on the nationalist struggle which was associated with Gandhi more than with any other human being. As P. Sitaramayya, a future All India Congress president, stated in his tribute in an All India Radio broadcast in early February 1948:

Mahatma Gandhi had finished his task and while the world will mourn his loss, by no means premature but altogether unnatural, we must recognise that as an ‘avatar’ that has finished his task has no place anymore in the domain of his functioning. ...

He is the tenth *avatar* that has descended into the world in this age of *kali* to make *dharma* walk on two legs. Indeed since June last year Mahatma Gandhi had reason to feel that he was outliving his need and that the gulf between his concept of society and policy and the accepted concepts around him was widening. The *avatars* in the past met with such a crisis on the eve of their *nirvana*.⁵⁷

This reflected a widespread sense that Gandhi’s death had completed his work. His death marked a temporal shift and underscored transitions from colonialism to post-colonialism in the profoundest sense. A most compelling question is to what extent Gandhi himself may have anticipated this, or even had a death-wish, as Ashis Nandy has speculated. In this light, Nehru’s observation that ‘Even in his death there was a magnificence and complete artistry’ could not be more fitting.⁵⁸

In this way it was not only the *grief* which accompanied Gandhi’s death which made it a seminal moment in the foundation of the Indian state’s legitimacy, but the sheer *fact* of his death. Whether it was mourned, celebrated, or discussed as a legal case or as a source of conspiracy theories and intrigues, indifference to such an event was impossible and the shared experience of his death developed a new sense of Indian-ness. Spatially this gap between citizens and state was narrowed by the close connections between the capital, New Delhi and the transmission by

⁵⁶ SWJN, 2nd series, Vol. 5, p. 66. Statement to the press, 25 February, 1948.

⁵⁷ Times of India, 5 February, 1948.

⁵⁸ SWJN, 2nd series, Vol. 5, p. 48. Written on 5 February and published in Harijan, 15 February, 1948. This also poses questions about the political culture of assassination in South Asia more generally, which could be explored further in relation to members of the Bhutto and Nehru–Gandhi dynasties.

radio, newspaper and film of the rituals which were taking place across the country (and within the new country's borders) and then, later, of the trial of Nathuram Godse. Today this point is upheld by 'Gandhi's prominence in local memories of independence and partition' and, as Peter Gottschalk has described in his fieldwork probing contemporary memories of Gandhi's death, 'the ubiquitous description by Arampur residents of Gandhi as *rashtrapita* (father of the nation) demonstrates the determination and success of the state to craft a memory that recognizes independence as both continuous with a venerable past and discontinuous with foreign domination'.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Distinguishing mourning from the rituals through which this mourning was enacted is not possible. However, the materiality of Gandhi's memorialization is surely not insignificant. Public and ritualized responses to Gandhi's death enabled the state to attempt to demarcate the extent of its power. The grey and poorly delineated legacies of citizenship, of marking out who was an Indian or a Pakistani and where borders lay, was complex and lasted for many years after Independence. But Gandhi's death was a critical moment at which Indian-state-ness was graphically inscribed by the Congress. The rituals following Gandhi's death also performed a critical bridging function between the state and the people. It enabled the reassertion of nation-state legitimacy in a new form at a time when the pluralistic and liberal legal framework of India's future constitution was far from assured. This was a collision-moment of the public and private, of state and society and an entanglement of the past and the future. It marked not simply the *de-legitimization* of the right and extremist forces but the actual *legitimization*, or at least nominal acceptance of, the new authority of the post-Partition, Congress-led, state. This state was both a spatial geographical settlement and centre of sovereign authority. This may have remained a Congress aspiration rather than a reality in places, and other lower order legitimacies continued to compete for power. Yet there is evidence of a sharp reduction in inter-ethnic violence and a greater acceptance of the secular message of the state immediately after Gandhi's death. The rituals following Gandhi's death contained all the collective emotional resonance, inner contradictions and localized interpretations of a Gandhian movement staged in colonial times *alongside* the sanction and support

⁵⁹Peter Gottschalk, 'A Mahatma for Mourners and Militants: the social memories of Mohandas Gandhi in Arampur', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2005), p. 56.

(rather than resistance of) the governmental machinery of the state.